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## ABSTRACT

Experience and its accompanying memory development of "what to do" is the school administrator's best teacher. This study attempts to answer the question of where it is that the core learning of the school administrator take place. An attempt is made to develop the beginning of an empirical base for the idea that such "accountable know-how" is already in place long before a person becomes an administrator. The sample consisted of three groups: undergraduates, teachers, and principals. Instrumentation consisted of a case study dealing with a leadership problem of a high school principal plus a brief response sheet that asked a person what he/she, as principal, would or would not do and why, in order to resolve the dilemma administered to the sample group. Findings indicate that organizational and role experience play a part in the thinking of principals in a way different from that of teachers and undergraduates. (SI)

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## KNOWING WHAT TO DO AND WHY:

TESTING AN ASSUMPTION ABOUT LEARNING THE BASICS OF  
ADMINISTRATION<sup>1</sup>

by

Arthur Blumberg and Brian Jerome<sup>2</sup>Introduction

When a school administrator is asked where he or she learned to do a particular thing in a particular way - negotiating, unraveling the genesis of a conflict among students, seeding a new curriculum idea among teachers, for example - the answer is most likely to be "experience". That may be the only response given or the administrator may relate an anecdote which, when translated, results in the same idea. That is, one learns to be an administrator by experiencing being an administrator. It is only in relatively rare cases, however, that a person can recall a specific instance of having learned how to do a certain thing, though most can recall a particular case of learning what not to do. They can remember a costly or embarrassing error they made and, as a result, had branded into their memory "Don't do this again".

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In School Administration as a Craft (Blumberg, 1988), the position is taken that what is involved in learning what to do or what not to do is the development of a sort of memory bank for what works and what doesn't work. The absence of such a memory bank accounts for the reason that most school principals find their first year in that position to be, in retrospective comparison with subsequent years, a fairly anxious one. Not having experienced that first year, which tends in broad outline to be a prototype for those that follow, no experiential memory had been developed for what to expect and what to do. Thus, moments of tension and anxiety occur as the unknown makes itself known, calling for action and/or decision, sometimes with startling swiftness.

The action and/or decision that is called for, whether as a result of an event new to the administrator's experience or one that is familiar, practically always involves dealing with people. It is hard to conceive of a situation in the work-life of a school administrator, for example, where even though the first action or decision required is to consult the school's or district's policy manual, subsequent action or decision does not effect an individual or a group. Thus, much as school administrators, principals and superintendents, will speak of "experience" as their teacher they will also tell you that they are primarily in the "people business". In broad outline, being in the "people business" involves knowing what to do when

confronted daily with a wide variety of problematic situations involving people and events. It means, for example, knowing when to soothe, to negotiate, to punish, to be directive, to moderate, to arbitrate, to be stern and unrelenting or relaxed and pliable, and on and on.

If, then, it is true that experience and its accompanying memory development of "what to do" is the school administrator's best teacher, and there is little reason to doubt that this is the case, and the experience that is relevant has to do with the "people business", we are left with the question of where is it that the core learnings of the school administrator takes place. Surely, for example, a school principal's first experience in administering punishment does not occur during his or her initial year as a principal or a vice-principal. And surely, as another illustration, although a superintendent may never have had any particular training in labor-management relations, she or he has had prior experience in negotiating their way through one sort of conflict or another. All of us, that is, whether we be school administrators, nuclear physicists or university professors have been in the people business all our lives. From the moment we were born we have either been acted on by others or we have acted on others. And it is, of course, through this acting on others and being acted on by others, a condition that we need in order to become social beings, that we learn our patterns of relating to each other and dealing with the world.

In reflecting on a previous publication that focussed on out-of-the ordinary school principals (Blumberg and Greenfield, 1980), the point was noted inferentially by one of the present authors in a paper which first introduced the notion of school administration as a craft (Blumberg, 1984).

"What we were really writing about were some characteristics these people seemed to have, long before they were exposed to 'science' in their graduate education. They had brought themselves to graduate school, so to speak -- their visions, their security, their intuitions - and they took themselves back to their schools when they finished, knowing some new things, perhaps, but still basically themselves," (p. 26).

It also seems conceptually clear that not only do people develop their own ways of viewing and dealing with the social world before they become (in our case) school administrators but that they also develop a rationale for the way they view and deal with events and people that impinge on them. There is not one of us who cannot, both before and after the fact, present a rationale for having done one thing or another in a problematic situation. This rationale, of course, typically has its basis in some valuing scheme, some right-wrong or "better than" context. It is probable that more often than not, because decisions made or actions taken are rarely zero-sum affairs, the valuing rationale that accompanies a decision or action is of a "better

than" variety. Any decision, that is, involves a judgement of one action being better than another and, thus, we may say that the process of administrative decision-making confronts a person with a continual set of moral dilemmas. In The Effective Principal (Blumberg and Greenfield, 1988), for example, the position taken was that

Making judgments about alternatives introduces a moral component to action, to the activities of teaching and to the activities of leading and managing a school. ... The moral component to action and decision-making requires that judgement be made. It thus carries with it the possibility, often a high probability, that one standard of goodness may be sacrificed for another (p. 223).

Making Decision A instead of B, even though B might achieve the same end result, that is, involves an individual's belief that somehow A is better than B even though B may have some important components to recommend it. And, of course, another individual might choose B over A for reasons similar to the A over B option.

Regardless, the assumption we make, by way of repetition, is that much as our administrator has learned, in effect, how to be one in the sense of knowing what to do long before he or she ever assumed that position, so has he or she learned the rationale for doing A or B long before A or B had to be done. This combination

- knowing what to do and why - is what Howard (1982, p. 68), in his fascinating discussion of the work of artists as the exercise of a craft, refers to as "accountable know-how". One caveat is necessary, however. It is that though we believe this administrative know-how - knowing what to do and why in particular situations - is developed in a person through rather natural growth and development we do not mean to suggest that a person who has this know-how necessarily has the skill to put it into practice effectively. The learning of what to do and of how to do it skillfully are quite different problems.

The study reported in this paper is an attempt to develop the beginning of an empirical base for the idea that such "accountable know-how" is already in place long before a person becomes, perhaps even thinks about becoming, an administrator.

### Instrumentation

The instrumentation problem was to construct a stimulus that would bear a reasonable similarity to social reality and require no technical acumen. In short, it would have to be a "people business" dilemma of the type not uncommonly experienced by school administrators. The problem was resolved by making use of a case study that appeared in Haller and Strike (1986), An Introduction to Educational Administration. This book is structured around several case studies the subjects of which are presumed to constitute major concerns of school

administrators. They include such things as resource allocation, collective bargaining, equal opportunity and so forth. Each chapter commences with a case which is then analyzed by the authors with regard to the behavioral science, legal and ethical issues it presents.

The first case in the book deals with a leadership problem of a high school principal. It involves a social studies teacher's refusal to use a textbook that had been chosen by a citizen-teacher committee of which he had been a member. The principal and the teacher meet and the principal is unable to persuade the teacher to use the book. The principal, in effect, is confronted with a case of teacher insubordination. What should he do and why?, is the question.

The instrumentation that was developed, then, was fairly straight forward. It was composed of the case just referred to plus a brief response sheet that asked a person what he or she, as principal, would or would not do and why in order to resolve the dilemma. The "would not" variety of the response sheet was included simply as an informal reliability check on the "would" responses. In addition, the response sheet included a request for demographic data - gender and type of school worked in.

#### Sample

The core of the study was focussed on the character of the

sample. It included three groups - one of undergraduates, one of teachers, and one of principals. Table 1 describes the sample in more detail.

Table 1  
Description of the Sample

|                | Male | Female | School Type<br>Elementary | Middle-Jr.<br>Sr. High |
|----------------|------|--------|---------------------------|------------------------|
| Undergraduates | 15   | 48     | -                         | -                      |
| Teachers       | 23   | 28     | 15                        | 36                     |
| Principals     | 35   | 11     | 22                        | 24                     |
| Total          | 73   | 87     | 37                        | 60                     |

Data were collected in three ways. Undergraduate responses were obtained through the cooperation of two professors in a teacher education program who distributed the case and response sheets to their classes. The cooperation of teachers was solicited through visits to three schools where the study was described to the faculty and the instruments left for completion. Responses from school principals were obtained through a mailing that utilized the membership of a principals' center.

#### Data Analysis and Results

The completed response sheets were first subjected to a content analysis in order to see if any major categories of action would develop. The responses of the "would not" form of

the instrument were converted to "would" through interpretation of double-negative responses. This presented a good bit of interpretive difficulty but the result seemed to confirm the reliability of the instrument in the sense that the conversion of the "would nots" into "woulds" resulted in little difference in the major categories that developed.

There were four major categories of response that emerged within each group. These were:

1. To mandate that the teacher use the text. (A number of responses were stated as simply as that and a number included what might be called "sweeteners", such as creating options for the teacher in addition to the mandate).
2. To postpone a decision and review the situation.
3. To give the teacher freedom to do as he wished.
4. Miscellaneous.

The modal response by far was Category 1. It accounted for over 50 percent of the responses in each of the three groups in the sample.

When the total configuration of the data was subjected to a

Chi-square analysis, the result was not significant,  $X = 3.99$ ,  $df = 6$ . There was no statistically significant difference, that is, among the three different groups concerning how they would deal with the problem presented by the case. Undergraduates and teachers appear to think in a manner similar to principals, at least within the limitations of this study. Likewise, when the responses were analyzed by gender and, in the case of principals and teachers, by the type of school in which they worked, no significant differences resulted. The similarity in thinking about the problem presented was present among the groups studied irrespective of gender or the influence of the work context.

On a more qualitative level, the influence of organizational and role experience was observed. In particular, it was only among the responses of the principals that any reference to the superintendent of schools or the school board was made. Further, it was only the principal group whose responses carried any reference to the possibility of a grievance being filed by the teacher. It seems, and quite understandably so, organizational and role experience play a part in the thinking of principals in a way different from that of teachers and undergraduates.

There is, as was indicated earlier, a second part of the "know-how" concept to which we must attend. Not only does the idea of accountable know-how involve knowing what to do but also why it should be done. We spoke of this earlier as having a

valuing dimension that, at times, implies a sort of morality that is attached to administrative decision-making.

The data that were produced in this study relative to the "why" question was very diffuse, thus making categorization and a quantitative analysis not feasible. We will, therefore, confine ourselves to some general impressions. First, it should be said that every solution of "what to do" about the dilemma was accompanied by a rationale. People "knew" the "why" of their solution to the problem. Inspection of the rationales given revealed, once more, a general similarity among the three groups. That is, when a "What to do" response was to mandate that the teacher use the text it was accompanied, for the most part, by a rationale that suggested that the teacher was part of the group that made the decision and should, indeed, abide by it. Not to do so, though that action might represent a victory for academic freedom would have a deleterious affect in the long term on the decision-making process and the process of curriculum development. Clearly, that is, implicit and sometimes explicit in the responses, the two values of a academic freedom and the need to maintain orderly processes were balanced against each other.

Similarly across groups, though the numbers were smaller, when the "what to do" suggested that the teacher be free to make the decision the "why" question was answered, generally, with the

thought that the teacher needed to be free to teach what he wanted or else poor teaching would result and the students would suffer. Again the question of balancing values is involved and, as we noted, there is a similarity of response regardless of whether the respondent was an undergraduate student, a teacher, or a school principal.

It is not necessary to push this data further. The point has been made that both on the "what to do" and "why" levels of know-how in the problem which has been addressed in this study there seems to be a remarkable similarity of response across groups. We have some support, then, for the proposition that people may well have developed the structure of administrative know-how long before the thought of being a school administrator enters their head.

### Discussion

The results and implications of this study must, like any other, be viewed through its conceptual and design limitations. The sample was not random and the response stimulus, i.e., the case, was a constructed reality and not reality itself. Further, the "know-how" focus of this study was on only one small part of the "what to do" repertoire which a school principal, for example, is required to call into play every working day. As well, as we indicated earlier, knowing what to do is not the same

thing as being able to do it skillfully and thus produce a desired end result. Nor, it needs to be said, is knowing what to do necessarily knowing what is the right thing to do.

Confronting school problems every day, that is, is not the same thing as confronting problems of arithmetic, for example. In the latter there are rules which, if attended to, result in the correct answer. One knows what to do beforehand, as it were. A school principal, on the other hand, generally knows if he or she has done the right thing only after it has been done.

Despite these limitations, however, we remain convinced that the results of this study provide some empirical basis for the idea that for the most part, what a person will be as a school administrator he or she already is long before being appointed to an administrative position. The conceptual point is that the job of a school principal or a school superintendent viewed in its most basic sense, involves the continual making of decisions and judgments, thus implying preferences and values about the use of self in relation to some relevant other or others during the course of a day's work. Our thought is, once more, that each of us has developed a framework for thinking and deciding about problematic situations and how we may best use ourselves in them through a long process of social learning that commenced very early in our life, perhaps on the day we were born.

Making this point, of course, does not at all suggest that a

school administrator's know-how is not elaborated upon, or expanded as a result of experience on-the-job. To think otherwise would be ludicrous. But to repeat, our knowledge of what school administrators do during the course of a day, obtained mostly through direct observation, suggests that the basic framework for their deciding and acting is a long-standing affair, having its roots first in family life and later in school and job-related experiences. It is through these experiences, after all, that we learn our idiosyncratic pattern of relating to others which most of us hold for a life-time. It is this pattern that enables an administrator to do daily whatever he or she does and emerge at the end of the day, tired perhaps, but with his or her self intact.

Obviously, we have just scratched the surface of the concept of administrative know-how in this study. It is in need of further elaboration through the development of more sophisticated design and data collection techniques. The nature of administration problems studied in order to test further the concept of know-how and its development also needs to be examined. For example, it is possible that there are types of problems that administrators encounter for which their background does not equip them nearly so well as it did for the problematic situation used in this study as the response stimulus.

As well, there are exciting possibilities for the study of

the derivation of know-how itself. Quite probably we would be dealing here with matters of child, adolescent and family development. Or possibly we would be dealing with one's history of school experiences or other more voluntary association experiences. The question for study in this regard might be something like, In what ways can we account (as in the case used in this study) for decisions to mandate conformity to school district policy as contrasted with decisions to delay or decisions to let the teacher "do his or her own thing"? Where did these decisions come from?, is the question.

#### A Step Beyond the Data

All the unanswered questions notwithstanding, we would be remiss if we did not take a step in the direction of rethinking the basics for administrative preparation programs, a matter that has received a great deal of consideration in the last couple of years. Our position, to start with, is that we do not teach people how to be administrators. As we have noted, we believe that in the most basic of ways, the people who come to graduate programs in order to learn how to be an administrator have already been taught and have learned its essential ingredients. If this be the case, what is left with which a graduate program need be concerned? Do we have anything to offer at all?

There are several ways of answering affirmatively to this question. First, though, it is necessary for professors to give

up the notion that there is such a thing as an administrative science which when learned and applied by an administrator will make school administration a more rational - sane? - process. As we noted earlier, we are dealing, instead, with the practice of a craft. It is with the understanding of this practice with which administration preparation programs need be concerned. Given this thought, then, here are some things that may be of value in these programs:

- There ought to be a concern and a focus on the types of administrative know-how that prospective administrators bring with them to their graduate program. We ought to help students become more aware of what they already know and thus enable them to think through alternative decisions and actions.
- There needs to be a strong emphasis on the value-oriented question of, What kind of a school or school system is it that you want to lead? What will it espouse for its students and how will you help make its educative actions approximate its espousals?
- There is a need to help students conceive of and understand schools and school districts as social systems with a history and a culture that result from factors political, economic, legal, sociological and psychological.

There is perhaps, an underlying need in all this for administrative preparation programs to be undergirded with an honest feeling of humility at not knowing the answer to it all.

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